

**Not-So-Super Heroes:
The Moral Humanization of Joss Whedon's Heroic Characters**

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[1] Throughout history people have fabricated and idolized heroes in an attempt to feel protected or proud of their societies. Whether these champions reflected real life, like the Knights of the Round Table, or were entirely fictional, like *DC's* Superman, their bravery and nobility instilled a sense of security and fascination in the lives of the mere mortals vicariously witnessing their greatness. The traits of these heroes—strength, humility, integrity, and chivalry—have been passed down since their conception and are still prominent in heroic characters today. Even though contemporary heroes tend to be more well-rounded and realistic than those of the past, many still follow this same traditional formula of heroic behaviors and actions. Joss Whedon, however, changed these rules forever.

[2] Although Whedon was not the first person to develop a flawed, imperfect protagonist, his particular creations helped to redefine what it means to be a hero. Making his start as an unknown writer and director, Whedon always favored underdogs and unexpected champions. He began his career as little more than a script-doctor, barely able to get his original voice heard in Hollywood. Through immense persistence, however, Whedon created his own story, which would later evolve into the film *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and got his first major gig as writer and director. This feature-length film was considered a failure by many, including Whedon, but like the underdogs in so many of his stories, Whedon eventually climbed his way to success (Pascale 51). He went on to create, write, direct, and produce a variety of cult-classic shows and films that were unique and ahead of their time in many ways, rewriting the rules of representing gender, youth, and heroism.

[3] Whedon has a number of fan-favorite shows and films in his repertoire, many of which contain this brand of flawed, imperfect heroes. Although *Firefly*, *Angel*, and *The Avengers* would all fit into this discussion of heroism, this paper focuses on Whedon's series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dollhouse*, as well as his film *The Cabin in the Woods*. These three works contain especially prominent and powerful examples of the immensely human flaws of their respective protagonists, highlighting Whedon's ability to take even the most supernatural of beings and bring them to a distinctly human level. This juxtaposition of immense power and responsibility paired with an intrinsic tendency towards human imperfection makes Whedon's characters intriguing and realistic heroes who are accessible to viewers.

[4] Of all of Whedon's works, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is arguably his greatest success. Airing from 1997-2003, the seven-season series evolved into one of the most academically-analyzed shows in television history. The show—for which Whedon was a creator, writer, director, and executive producer—revolves around teenager Buffy Summers, the Chosen One to battle vampires and demons. When she is not at school or socializing at the local dance club, Buffy is the Slayer, destined to protect the world from the evils of the Hellmouth, also known as Sunnydale, California. With the help of her Watcher, Giles, and her band of loyal friends, Buffy saves the world from numerous apocalypses and learns about the struggles and, occasionally, the gifts that life has to offer.

[5] Another of Whedon's television creations is the 2009-2010 sci-fi series *Dollhouse*. This show, for which Whedon served again a creator, director, writer, and executive producer, was much less of a cult-classic success than *Buffy*. The show focuses on the theme of mind control and the morals, or lack thereof, of human trafficking. The Dollhouse is an underground institution designed to cater to the innermost desires and fantasies of its rich clientele. The institution employs “broken” people, those who have nothing else left for them in life, and turns them into controllable beings, also known as dolls. The Dollhouse uses advanced technology to wipe the dolls' original personalities, imprinting them instead with new personas and skills per the request of the clients. Sometimes these requests reflect the show's obvious parallel to prostitution, but on other occasions they involve the dolls transforming into assassins, robbers, spies, or even doctors. Echo, one such doll, gains agency throughout the series, escaping the corrupt corporation and discovering who she truly is.

[6] *The Cabin in the Woods*, simultaneously a horror film and a spoof of horror films, was released in 2012, and was co-written and executive-produced by Whedon. The film follows the initially clichéd horror formula of five college students spending the weekend in a creepy cabin in the woods. Despite this predictable setup, Whedon and co-writer and director Drew Goddard add another layer to the story: an underground facility that scientifically designs and manipulates the “kids'” horrific excursion in order to sacrifice them to a furious and demanding race of gods known as the Ancient Ones. The kids fight for survival against a mob of zombies upstairs while the “Whitecoats,” those designing the horror scenario, watch indifferently from the facility downstairs. This disturbing dynamic goes on until the system's conventions are unexpectedly defied, creating mass chaos and carnage for everyone involved.

[7] In his shows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dollhouse*, and his recent film *The Cabin in the Woods*, Whedon creates characters who are established as the heroes of their narratives, but who deviate from the traditional definition of heroism. The question, then, is what exactly is traditional heroism? With every new generation, the behavior and values of heroes change in tune with the needs and expectations of society. One hero who has maintained much of the historical and traditional values of America, however, is Superman. As Superman scholar Larry

Tye describes it, “It was on his muscle-bound back that the iconic comic book took flight and the very idea of the superhero was born” (ix). Although Superman has evolved over time, he stems from a certain breed of hero that rarely deviates from his original values. Known for his stick-straight morals and endless pursuit of “truth, justice, and the American way,” Superman highlights many of the characteristics associated with traditional heroism (Booker 55).

[8] Recent depictions of Superman, such as the 2013 film *Man of Steel*, envision him as slightly more human than in the hero’s original comics, giving him a noticeable set of flaws and failures. Throughout the majority of his reincarnations, however, such as the 1978 *Superman: The Movie* and the 2006 *Superman Returns*, the Man of Steel occupies a higher moral plane than the human race. In both of these film adaptations of the iconic hero, Superman is unequivocally moral and puts others’ needs before his own. In this way, Superman serves as a contrast for the flawed, morally imperfect protagonists of Whedon’s narratives who, despite their proximity to the supernatural, deviate time and again from traditional heroism.

Self-Preservation

[9] Traditionally speaking, one of the first rules of heroism is putting the needs of others before oneself. As the staple traditional hero of this discussion, Superman fulfills this stipulation perfectly. In Bryan Singer’s *Superman Returns*, as in most Superman mythology, the title hero is nearly impregnable with the exception of his one famed weakness: Kryptonite. By the climax of the film, Lex Luthor has created a landmass constructed almost purely from Kryptonite, a fact that Superman senses as he draws nearer to his nemesis. Superman is perfectly aware that the substance weakens him almost to the point of impotence, but he also knows that he is the only one who stands a chance against Luthor’s plot to destroy North America. Even with this knowledge of the inevitable harm awaiting him, Superman flies straight towards the Kryptonite-laced island in an attempt to stop Lex and to save the world, just barely escaping his own death in the process. Whedon’s heroes have a much harder time coming to such a self-sacrificing solution. In fact, his protagonists more than once disregard other people’s needs entirely, putting their own safety before everyone else’s. This is the case in both *Buffy* and *Cabin*, in which Buffy, Marty, and Dana all defy the social conventions expected of them as the “heroes” of their narratives, opting instead for a route of self-preservation.

[10] Buffy’s act of self-preservation understandably occurs during her first major encounter with apocalyptic disaster. Even though she has been exposed for years to the danger and horror of slaying vampires and demons, the task she is assigned in the Season One finale is too much for her to handle. With the imminent threat of hell-on-Earth upon them, Giles alerts Buffy to a prophecy that declares that the Slayer will sacrifice herself to the Master, an ancient and horrific vampire. The only way to fulfill the prophecy and save the rest of humanity is if Buffy allows herself to be killed by the Master. Despite the endless heroics she has demonstrated

in every episode prior to the finale, Buffy is mortified by this notion. She refuses outright to walk to her own death even if it means that the rest of the world will suffer: “Giles, I’m sixteen years old . . . I don’t wanna die” (“Prophecy Girl” B1012). Buffy’s selfishness is understandable from a human perspective; she has barely begun to live life, and now she has to die an undoubtedly violent death. She has already sacrificed so much to protect the world from vampires and demons, how is it fair that she has to die, too?

[11] From a traditionally heroic standpoint, such as the one represented by Superman, the audience would expect Buffy to bravely shoulder her responsibility as Slayer and sacrifice herself for the rest of humanity. The fact that her first reaction is the complete opposite of this noble sentiment and is instead a move towards self-preservation shows just how human Buffy really is. She may have super strength and predestined powers, but underneath those supernatural layers is a sixteen year-old girl who is not ready to die. As *Buffy* scholar Greg Stevenson explains, “One of the hardest lessons Buffy has to learn [...] is that death is an enemy she cannot fight” (4). In fact, Buffy’s proximity to death only goes to further highlight her humanity, proving that despite her incredible skills and adventures, she still has to confront the same inevitable end that all human beings eventually encounter. Even though she has faced countless monsters in her time as Slayer, Buffy is far from invincible and cannot escape her destiny. She runs away, attempts to defy the prophecy, and denies her duties as Slayer before she finally accepts her fate. Although she does eventually go through with the sacrifice, Buffy’s vacillation is what distinguishes her from the traditional hero, successfully humanizing a seemingly impregnable character.

[12] Marty and Dana experience a similar moment of indecision in the final scenes of *Cabin*. At this point in the film, the two kids are the only ones left standing. Their friends have been killed, the facility has been ravaged by nightmarish beasts, and all of the Whitecoats have been destroyed in a variety of gruesome horror-movie deaths. All Marty and Dana have left is each other, a small but potent comfort after the hell they have experienced. Whedon describes this surprisingly touching friendship, saying, “It’s that thing that he’s not the love interest—what they have is something that’s more beautiful. That’s, you know, this friendship bond, that endless comradery in the trenches, and this fatalism, and this understanding” (DVD Commentary). Despite this powerful bond and the fact that they both have saved each other multiple times by this point in the film, Marty and Dana both falter in their heroic resolve to protect one another. When told by the Director of the facility that the only hope for humanity’s survival is Marty’s death, Dana initially refuses to harm her friend. As the scene continues, however, and the desperation of the situation becomes more apparent, Dana makes the instant decision to put her life before Marty’s. She raises her gun, pointing it at him regrettably but resolutely, willing to murder her friend if it guarantees her own safety.

[13] Although he appears to be the victim of the situation, Marty, too, acts in self-preservation when faced with Dana's homicidal behavior. As she levels the gun at him, Marty, along with the audience, catches sight of a rogue werewolf creeping up behind her, escaped from the chaos in the facility above them. Instead of immediately alerting Dana to its presence and rescuing her from a brutal attack, Marty allows the werewolf to maul her, only shooting it once the threat of Dana's betrayal has vanished. Both characters, despite their seemingly impenetrable bond, falter in the face of their own demise, instinctively moving to protect themselves even at the cost of their friend's life. As they wait out their last few minutes of existence, the two exchange a dialogue that encapsulates their momentary blips in heroism. Dana says, "I'm so sorry I almost shot you. I probably wouldn't have," to which Marty consolingly responds, "Hey, shh, no. I totally get it. I'm sorry I let you get attacked by a werewolf and then ended the world." The nonchalance of their apologies is used for comedic effect, but the immorality of their decisions remains the same. This failure, like Buffy's initial refusal to give up her young life to the Master, demonstrates the flawed, human tendencies of characters who otherwise seem inaccessible to viewers. Because the typical viewer of either of these works is inevitably an average, mortal human being, it is difficult to relate to Buffy's mystical powers and Dana and Marty's bizarre situation. When the characters are humanized by their attempt at self-preservation, however, it does not matter that the audience has never fought a vampire or been attacked by evil gods because anyone can relate to the characters' momentary selfishness and instinct to survive.

Ethics

[14] When it comes to right and wrong, Superman is one of the most unambiguous heroes around. Although certain versions of the hero present him as more human than flawless, the vast majority frame Superman as morally perfect. In Richard Donner's 1978 Superman film, the hero is described as "Six-foot-four, has black hair, blue eyes, doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, and tells the truth." Whether it is a simple issue of not drinking on the job or the more difficult task of avoiding excessive violence at all costs, Superman takes the moral highroad in all of his actions. Throughout Whedon's works, the theme of making ethical decisions, especially those in which the character at hand realizes he is doing something immoral, is omnipresent. In many instances, such as those previously mentioned, Whedon's characters do not take the time to think through their decisions, but rather act upon human instinct. When Buffy is told about her prophesied death, she does not stop to consider the repercussions of her decision, but instinctively protects herself. In both *Dollhouse* and *Cabin*, however, the protagonists make harmful choices while fully considering the consequences of their actions before doing them. Once again, these choices, in this case made by Paul and Dana, bring the stories' heroes down from their pedestals to the level of average, often corrupt human beings.

[15] From the very first episode of *Dollhouse*, Paul is depicted as the tough, unwavering, morally-sound hero of the narrative. An FBI agent relentlessly trying to find and take down the Dollhouse, Paul is constantly degraded by his coworkers and superiors for believing in what the rest of the world deems a fairytale. He perseveres despite these insults, and throughout the first season is blatantly framed as a savior figure, destined to rescue the captive dolls, especially Echo, from their enslavement. This Superman-esque portrayal is questioned, however, when Paul's role as a passionate cop and his resemblance to a Dollhouse client become blurred. His previously stick-straight morality becomes entirely ambiguous as the motives for his quest to take down the Dollhouse and his treatment of the dolls in his life evolve.

[16] The character Joel Miner, a client of the Dollhouse himself, is the first to point out the similarities between Paul's infatuation with Echo and the behavior of clients who fall in love with dolls. Paul is initially aghast at this suggestion, grossly offended at being compared to such depraved, indulgent people. In reality, Joel's observation predicts further deviant behavior on the part of Paul when he knowingly takes advantage of a woman in the very same manner that the Dollhouse's clients objectify their actives. Having discovered that his new girlfriend Mellie is actually a doll planted in his life to keep tabs on him, Paul breaks her heart in an attempt to keep her at a distance. When they reunite, however, Paul lets his emotions and frustration take over and sleeps with Mellie, fully aware that she has been manipulated to love him. In doing so, he becomes just as despicable as the people he sought to take down. After their night together, Mellie, unaware of the irony of the situation, asks Paul, "Are you gonna do more hunting today? For Dollhouse clients?" Paul blankly responds, more to himself than to Mellie, "I found one" ("Haunted" DH1010). Despite Paul's above-average morality and his vehement opposition to the Dollhouse's actions, he cannot escape the inherently indulgent nature of human beings. Even though he knows he is doing something he cannot abide, Paul makes the conscious decision to take advantage of Mellie and perpetuate the debauchery of the Dollhouse. His choice, seemingly uncharacteristic for the honorable FBI agent seen in the show's first episode, appeals to human nature and to all of the temptations and mistakes intrinsic in human behavior.

[17] Dana, too, defies the ethical standards expected of the traditional hero in her decision to permit the violent deaths of hundreds of people in *Cabin*. Before Marty and Dana end up in the sacrificial cavern underneath the facility, the pair runs for their lives through the hallways of the building. They hide in an operations booth, cornered by a battalion of heavily-armed guards, with no route of escape. Noticing a button that will release all of the monsters in the facility's arsenal, Dana has a moment to make her conscious decision of how to respond. Although there are few, if any, other ways the pair could possibly escape, a traditional hero would attempt an action of surrender or diversion, anything besides the chaotic slaughter that Dana considers. She does not take the time to find a more humane escape, however, opting instead for the route she finds most immediately satisfying. Whedon discusses the ethical quandary of such a decision, saying, "I don't think the demarcation [of right and wrong] is actually that simple. I think there's

also a level at which you understand the meaning of the microcosm of your own personal relationships as being the actual world” (DVD Commentary). Whedon is, to an extent, justifying Dana’s actions, not necessarily condoning the slaughter of the Whitecoats, but reminding the audience that Dana’s whole world has been shattered. The Whitecoats indifferently murdered her friends, who, as Whedon mentions, are an integral part of Dana’s young life. By pushing the button and releasing the monsters, Dana is getting justice for her friends and for herself, but it is a justice driven by revenge, something by which a traditional hero would never allow herself to be tempted.

[18] The element of Dana’s decision that especially emphasizes the immorality of her choice is her dialogue as she presses the button that releases the monsters. With the hint of a smile on her face she says, “Let’s get this party started,” signifying to the audience that Dana’s actions are indeed only in part an attempt to escape. The rest of her motives, as Whedon alludes, are an act of vengeance driven by an understandable fury at the people who orchestrated the horrifying deaths of her friends. Dana has been through hell because of the Whitecoats’ ritual, made all the worse by their clear desensitization and merriment at the bloody evisceration of the kids. While the footage of Dana being viciously attacked by a zombie is playing on their monitors, the Whitecoats throw a party complete with music, dancing, and champagne. The juxtaposition of the horrific attempt at murder and the Whitecoats’ nonchalant celebration successfully displays just how disgusting their mentality really is. Reflecting upon such a disturbing scene, viewers, like Whedon, are tempted to agree with Dana’s ultimate decision, even though it defies what is expected of a traditional hero. Justification of Dana’s vengeance aside, her decision to release the monsters and ensure the deaths of the Whitecoats once again demonstrates the tendency of Whedon’s heroes to deviate from traditional heroic norms, opting instead for human imperfection.

Sacrifice

[19] Another repeated flaw in Whedon’s imperfect protagonists is their tendency to behave selfishly during the time of sacrifice. Sacrifice as a suspenseful plot point is so common in Whedon’s works that it borders on cliché. *Buffy* and *Cabin*, for instance, rely heavily on the trend of both self-sacrifice and the sacrifice of others, a theme that the characters tend to resist or abuse. Singer’s Superman demonstrates the traditional expectations of a hero in such a situation when he chooses to save Metropolis before rescuing the love of his life, Lois. Even though he knows Lois is in danger at the hands of Lex Luthor, Superman puts the needs of the many over his own selfish desires and rushes to save the thousands threatened in the city. Where a traditional hero would do whatever had to be done in order to serve the greater good of humanity, Buffy and Marty opt for selfish solutions, once again putting their own needs and beliefs before the well-being of others.

[20] Buffy faces a nearly impossible decision in the Season Five finale when she is forced to choose between sacrificing her sister Dawn or letting the world be enveloped in a hell dimension. Stevenson defines the traditionally moral solution, saying, “What distinguishes moral choices on *Buffy* is the value placed upon human life. [...] A moral choice is one that sacrifices self-desire for service to others” (5). Buffy defies this trend when faced with the impending death of her sister, tired of putting everyone else’s interests in front of what she believes is right. Without thinking twice about the matter, Buffy is determined to protect Dawn, whatever the consequences for the rest of the world may be. Even after years of fighting demons, her own death at the hands of the Master, and her decision to sacrifice her boyfriend Angel in Season Two, Buffy refuses to cross the line in killing her little sister.

[21] The rationality of this choice is questioned when Giles, the resident intellectual and adult on the show, disagrees with Buffy’s motives, saying that however horrible it may be, she needs to think of the rest of humanity before herself. Buffy responds to this ultimatum by staring him down with the challenge, “Tell me to kill my sister” (“The Gift” B5022). Giles sees her decision as selfish and irresponsible, but Buffy does not care, opting instead to fulfill her own desires for once in her life. Buffy’s choice to protect her sister has a definite ring of nobility to it, but, as Giles points out, it is ultimately futile. If Dawn is not sacrificed, the entirety of humanity, including Buffy and her sister, will be subjected to eternal hell. This enigmatic fact goes even deeper to show Buffy’s stubbornness and irrationality in her moral decision to save Dawn, highlighting the flaws in her heroism and further humanizing the character.

[22] The theme of sacrifice is omnipresent in *Cabin*, acting as the haunting backdrop of the otherwise clichéd horror film. Although all of the kids are sacrificed by the end of the movie, the crux of the sacrifice lies in Marty’s hands. As the last survivor aside from Dana, the “virgin,” whose death is optional, Marty is faced with the Director’s challenge: “You can die with them, or you can die for them.” Marty encounters the same dilemma as Buffy, except this time, the life he chooses to save is his own. A traditional hero would have no doubt about how to respond to Marty’s puzzle: the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. For many modern audiences, there does not seem to be a single correct answer to Marty’s enigma; innocent people are ruthlessly killed either way. Despite this unfortunate fact, traditional heroism dictates that the few should shoulder this unjust burden in order to preserve the lives of the majority. Marty, however, is clearly not a traditional hero.

[23] What makes Marty’s action of saving himself different from one of self-preservation is the motive he has in making the decision. Although it is clear that he does not want to kill himself, Marty’s primary intention is to stop the cycle of murder that has been going on since the Ancient Ones came into being. He knows that his own death will satisfy the ritual and save the world, but that in doing so he would be perpetuating the corrupt system. When the Director alerts him to the foolishness of this resolution, Marty replies, “Maybe that’s the way it should be if you

have to kill my friends to survive. Maybe it's time for change." Despite his noble intentions, Marty is thinking too microscopically about the issue, once again putting revenge before the traditionally heroic decision. Where a traditional hero would do whatever it takes to save the human race, Marty looks more deeply into the flaws of the system, and in doing so, shows the heroic flaws within himself.

Villainy

[24] One of the aspects of Whedon's works that makes them so fresh and fascinating is their tendency to take dramatically unexpected turns. This excitement stems from a variety of plot twists, but one of Whedon's favorite techniques is to transform a character who was previously a "good guy" into a villain. Although this happens often throughout his work—see Boyd, Whiskey, Stephen Kepler, and Angel, for example—two instances in which the most moral characters of their narratives turn evil are the cases of Willow and Tony. Both characters are faced with immense emotional trauma that leads them to express their grief and anger by transforming into the very entities they previously fought. Donner's Superman showcases the traditionally heroic reaction to grief when he is faced with the death of Lois after a horrific landslide. Instead of letting his devastation take over, Superman harnesses his grief in order to find a solution to the problem, flying around the world to turn back time and save Lois. Unlike Superman's rational response to the traumatic situation, Whedon's protagonists give in to the temptation of evil. Willow's transformation in *Buffy* develops into a much larger, darker role than Tony's evolution in the *Dollhouse* finale, but both aptly demonstrate the temptation and weakness intrinsically present in even superhuman characters.

[25] Willow is from the start depicted as an unquestionably good and sweet character in *Buffy*. A mousy girl with strict morals and a kind heart, Willow is the character least expected to turn evil in the series, which is precisely why her transformation at the end of Season Six is so shocking and exciting. Willow's evolution into "Dark Willow" is alluded to throughout the series by her increased dependence upon magic to simplify life for herself and others. Her real transformation occurs, however, at the most heartbreaking moment of the series. After a messy breakup, Willow finally reunites with the love of her life, Tara, who is fatally shot mere days later. Kristen Barton describes Willow's response in her article about Whedon's tendency to kill off his characters: "Because of Whedon's slow progression towards reuniting [Willow and Tara] over the course of many episodes and the sudden shock of Tara's death, Willow's unimaginable rampage climaxing in an attempt to destroy the world resonates as believable for that character" (Barton 155). Where in other instances such a dramatic occurrence would appear ridiculous and unrealistic, Willow's immense emotional response feels plausible to viewers who have witnessed her passion for Tara as well as her subtle moral decline throughout the series. The onslaught of grief and fury that Willow experiences at Tara's death triggers her evolution into a vastly

immoral character and the complete opposite of what the audience expects to see in the previously heroic protagonist.

[26] The level of darkness that Willow reaches in Season Six is unlike most anything seen in the notion of traditional heroism. Such heroes would never allow their emotions to turn them into the very evil they were destined to overcome. Not only does Willow physically change when she turns into a villain, but her entire personality transforms, too. She becomes a vicious, uncaring, and immoral character, who completely disregards all of the rules and ethics she was once so careful to obey. When it comes to getting revenge on Warren, the man who killed Tara, Willow breaks Buffy's cardinal rule of slaying: "We don't kill humans. It's not the way" ("Villains" B6020). She tortures and kills Warren, threatening and injuring her friends and loved ones in the process. Willow's immense grief and the thirst she has for revenge cause her to abandon her morals and become the antithesis of a hero. Audiences recognize the validity of her emotions, but also see the vast humanization and vulnerability of the powerful, magical character.

[27] Tony, too, goes through a transformation of morals at the end of *Dollhouse*, albeit on a smaller scale than Willow's. Previously "employed" as the doll known as Victor, Tony is one of the rebels working alongside Echo to destroy the Rossum Corporation, and is arguably one of the most morally-sound characters of the group. Throughout the series he risks his life multiple times to save his cohorts and to help them escape their Dollhouse prison. A former military man, Tony recognizes the strategic power of Rossum's technology, even if it was created for immoral purposes. When the world turns apocalyptic and the rebels are forced to flee from the carnage created by Rossum's inventions, Tony makes the decision to stay behind and use the technology to give himself a fighting chance. The immorality of this choice is reflected through the reaction of his girlfriend, also a former doll, named Priya, who despises the technology that enslaved her for so many years and caused their dystopian existence. She is furious at Tony's betrayal, exclaiming, "You chose to stay steeped in it, Tony! To be seduced by the tech. You chose to be Victor" ("Epitaph Two: Return" DH2013). She leaves Tony behind, vehemently hating the man she had previously loved. This fact alone, that Tony would risk ruining his relationship with the woman he has worked so hard to care for and protect, demonstrates the severity of his transformation from a heroic character to one who sacrifices his morals in order to provide for himself.

[28] Tony's embrace of the Rossum technology is made unambiguously negative by the fact that he and his compatriots choose to identify themselves once more by their Dollhouse names. This fact, paired with their cyborg-esque technology implants, shows just how robotic Victor has become, ironically regressing back to his mindless-doll roots. Victor's temptation is evident through his desire to make things easier for himself in the very same way that Willow becomes too invested in magic. He uses the Rossum tech to imprint himself with skills and

abilities, successfully skipping the endless practice and hard work otherwise needed to attain them: “I know how good it feels. Skip learning the hard way. Skip the long hours [...] the sweat, the training. Just to feel the thrill of perfection” (“Epitaph Two: Return” DH2013). Victor succumbs to the temptation of easy power, reverting to the methods of his enemies to satisfy his addiction. Instead of gaining his power by honest means, Victor cheats his way to success at the cost of his morals and his loved ones.

[29] Even though Whedon’s characters fight vampires, transform into spies, and defy evil gods, they are more relatable than most. Whedon’s protagonists live incredible lives and do amazing things, but at their core, they are human beings. They are imperfect despite their supernatural powers and situations, and are just as flawed morally as those watching their shows. This connection between average people and superhuman characters is the very thing that makes Whedon’s shows and movies so successful. Even though he started with a small cult-following, Whedon’s fan-base has grown rapidly and impressively. This fan-base is not only unique in its velocity of growth, but also in its loyalty and passion for Whedon’s works and characters. Fan pages and conventions have been conducted in Whedon’s honor, and scholars have generated an unprecedented number of articles and scholarly analyses covering his works. The world is enamored with Whedon’s stories and characters, and the humanization of his heroes is at the root of that infatuation.

[30] Viewers relate to characters in movies and television shows all the time and these characters are often similar to the audience themselves. In order for these viewers to relate to a character who deviates from their own lives and experiences, they have to extend themselves to bridge this gap in commonalities. Whedon’s characters break this trend. Instead of forcing viewers to reach to relate to them, Whedon brings his supernatural protagonists down to a human level, creating a universal accessibility to characters who would otherwise be impossible to fully understand. Viewers do not have to be a doll to comprehend Tony’s temptation, they do not need magical powers to sympathize with Willow’s grief, or have to be part of a ritual sacrifice to understand Dana’s thirst for vengeance. The characters themselves are at their very cores human and imperfect in the exact same way that viewers are human and imperfect. People watch Whedon’s works to witness the thrills and fantasy he is so famous for, but they stay for the characters whose fear, temptation, and heartbreak they have experienced in their own lives.

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